

Australians take refuge on coast as fires spread; Government prepared to deploy military boats, choppers for evacuations

The Toronto Star

January 1, 2020 Wednesday

Copyright 2020 Toronto Star Newspapers Limited

Section: NEWS; Pg. A2

Length: 607 words

Byline: Isabella Kwai The New York Times

Dateline: SYDNEY

Body

As the fire stalked the east coast of Australia on Tuesday, the daytime sky turned inky black, then blood red. Emergency sirens wailed, followed by the thunder of gas explosions. Thousands of residents fled their homes and huddled near the shore. There was nowhere else to go.

Apocalyptic scenes like these in Mallacoota, a vacation destination between Sydney and Melbourne, came on the last day of the warmest decade on record in Australia. The country is in the grip of a devastating fire season, with months of summer still to go as record-breaking temperatures, strong winds and prolonged drought have ignited huge blazes across the country.

The government prepared to deploy navy vessels and military helicopters to help fight the fires and evacuate people.

The devastation is immense. In New South Wales, which includes Sydney, more than 900 homes have been destroyed and nine million acres have burned since November. About 100 fires are raging in the state, with about three dozen more across the border in Victoria. At least 11 people have died.

Australia is normally hot and dry in summer, but climate change, which brings more frequent and longer periods of extreme heat, worsens these conditions and makes vegetation drier and more likely to burn. The country recently concluded its driest spring on record. That was followed in mid-December by the hottest day on record, with average highs across the country of 41.9 C.

Polls show a large majority of Australians view climate change as an urgent threat and want stronger government action to combat it.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, a conservative, has made it clear that Australia's economic prosperity comes first. Even as his country burned, he has said repeatedly that it is not the time to discuss climate policy.

As Australia has seen a surge of climate activism in recent months, Morrison has gone so far as to suggest that the government should outlaw efforts by environmental groups to pressure businesses with rallies and boycotts. Other members of Morrison's government have answered calls for action with insults; the deputy prime minister called people who care about global warming "raving inner-city lunatics."

More recently, Morrison has been in damage control mode over his decision to vacation in Hawaii even as authorities raised emergency fire warnings across the country. He cut the trip short after two volunteer firefighters died.

Australians take refuge on coast as fires spread; Government prepared to deploy military boats, choppers for evacuations

Those deaths raised questions about Australia's reliance on an overwhelmingly volunteer firefighting force. After initially resisting calls to compensate firefighters, Morrison announced limited daily payments. The government has also requested firefighting help from Canada and the United States.

The fires have been a constant presence in Australia for weeks, but the eerie images that emerged on social media on Tuesday cast them in a new light, and seemed to be a harbinger for the new decade that the country rang in hours later.

So heavy was the smoke, it even drifted over to neighbouring New Zealand, 2,100 km away, who woke up to a blood-red sun on New Year's Day.

With several blazes burning out of control, thousands were stranded in evacuation centres in other towns along the coast as firefighters told people to stay put.

In Mallacoota, in the state of Victoria, residents spent Monday night preparing to evacuate. As the fire approached, some gathered at a community centre, while others climbed into boats in bodies of water.

Ida Dempsey of Melbourne, who spends Christmas in the area with her family, also took refuge on the water. "We couldn't see a thing. It was pitch black. We had face masks; the smoke was very bad."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); EXTREME TEMPERATURES (90%); FIRES (90%); COASTAL AREAS (89%); FIREFIGHTERS & FIREFIGHTING (89%); NEGATIVE NEWS (89%); DEATH & DYING (78%); WEATHER (78%); WILDFIRES (78%); EXPLOSIONS (77%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (77%); NAVIES (77%); PRIME MINISTERS (77%); HEADS OF STATE & GOVERNMENT (72%); CLIMATE ACTION (71%); ENVIRONMENTAL & WILDLIFE ORGANIZATIONS (71%); GLOBAL WARMING (70%); POLLS & SURVEYS (67%); CLIMATE CHANGE REGULATION & POLICY (66%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (66%); NEGATIVE BUSINESS NEWS (66%); BOYCOTTS (63%); NEGATIVE MISC NEWS (62%); VOLUNTEERS (60%)

Industry: MILITARY VESSELS (90%); MILITARY HELICOPTERS (77%); NAVAL VESSELS (77%); NAVIES (77%); HELICOPTERS (72%); DESTINATIONS & ATTRACTIONS (71%); GLOBAL WARMING (70%)

Person: SCOTT MORRISON (79%)

Geographic: SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA (92%); MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA (79%); HAWAII, USA (79%); NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA (79%); VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA (79%); AUSTRALIA (98%); CANADA (79%); NORTH AMERICA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: January 1, 2020

Australians take refuge on coast as fires spread; Government prepared to deploy military boats, choppers for evacuations

End of Document